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RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD PRIORITY 0663
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PRIORITY 0730
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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000728

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PARIS FOR ZEYA, LONDON FOR TSOU

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SUBJECT: DAMASCUS-BASED HAMAS OFFICIALS TO TRAVEL TO MOSCOW

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) Russian DCM Alexsey Erkhov told Polchief on February 26 that Hamas political leaders, including those based in Damascus, would likely travel at the beginning of March to Moscow where they would meet with Russian FM Sergei Lavrov and Deputy FM Alexander Saltanov. When asked whether Hamas leaders would also meet the Russian President, Erkhov responded, "probably not" citing "technical reasons," including the fact that the Russian February 23-24 Defenders' Day holiday had not left enough time to plan a meeting. Erkhov did not, however, explicitly rule out such a meeting.

¶2. (C) The Russians plan to discuss with Hamas demands by the Quartet that the rejectionist group recognize Israel, accept previous agreements, and renounce violence. To illustrate his point that political events and nuanced political engagement with Hamas could help mold the group's behavior and priorities, Erkhov noted that Hamas had largely refrained from violence for almost a year under the Cairo-negotiated truce. Hamas has difficult political decisions to make and the Russian government wants to work with them on ways to make those decisions, Erkhov said. When asked whether the Russians were bothered by Hamas' ties to terrorism, Erkhov said, "Yes, but we're looking toward the future." The GOR believes engagement is important to try to transform Hamas from a terrorist organization or even a national liberation organization into a future peace partner, Erkhov said.
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